



FROM THE DESK OF THE DDSN MEDICAL CONSULTANT

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:



Written by:

Graeme Johnson, M.D.
MEDICAL CONSULTANT
SCDDSN
3440 Harden Street Ext.
P.O. Box 4706
Columbia, SC 29240
PHONE:
(803) 898-9808
FAX:
(803) 898-9656
EMAIL:
gjohnson@ddsn.sc.gov



CHOKING

We need our lungs to work.

We need oxygen to live. The oxygen in the air needs to get down the air passages of the nose, back of the throat (called the pharynx) into the trachea and bronchioles in the lung to air sacs where the oxygen is absorbed and carbon dioxide exchanged so that we can maintain life. If the airways are blocked or if damaged or fluid stops the air sacs working then we are without oxygen, as a result we become sick and can die. Things like asthma, bronchitis, and pneumonia can cause problems getting enough oxygen, but this letter is mainly to look at the problem of choking.

What is choking?

Choking happens when an object or piece of food gets stuck in the pharynx (back of throat) or airway and blocks the air getting into the lungs. If the object cannot be removed by the person coughing, then the oxygen does not get to the person's bloodstream through their lungs and they can die.

How do we eat and swallow without choking?

When we are eating we chew the food in our mouth. Then we organize it to swallow it down into the esophagus (the tube that leads down from the lower part of the throat (pharynx) to the stomach). In the pharynx, just below the back of the tongue, is the entrance to the airway to the lungs. It is covered by a flap called the epiglottis. This flap is open for us to breath, but when we swallow it closes the airway, so that food does not get in the airway to the lungs. When a person chokes, something like a piece of food or anything from the mouth (e.g., toy a child is sucking on) gets stuck across the airway in the pharynx or in the airway at the esophagus or below it.

What does choking look like?

This is a terrifying experience and the person cannot breath, they cannot talk, and often cannot swallow. They will be agitated, will grab their throat or wave their arms. They will try to cough but their cough may be weak and they may be wheezing and perhaps drooling. We need to act immediately to help them.

What do we do if a person chokes?

The way to help is to use the first aid abdominal thrust (Heimlich maneuver). From behind the person, place the thumb side of your fist against the middle of their abdomen just above the navel. Grasp your fist with the other hand and give quick upward thrusts. **Have someone also call 911.** Sometimes we cannot manage with this procedure and need to care for the person if they become unconscious. If you do not know this way to help or have not practiced it recently, please ask your health team to train you. We never know when we may need to use it – at work with consumers, at home at mealtimes, out at a restaurant, or with a child choking on a toy part. ***Please be ready!***

***How can we reduce the threat of choking?***

The most common cause for choking is pieces of food. Our consumers are often at risk because they cannot munch and chew or swallow in an organized way. Any consumer who gags or coughs during meals needs to be checked by your nutrition management team. If we make the food into smaller pieces or even pureed we may help swallowing be safer. Often we have to slow the persons eating pattern down to be safe and certainly watch for stuffing or over-stuffing food into the mouth. We need especially to watch our consumers who steal food as they may have large pieces in their mouth and hurry and hurry to swallow without completely chewing food.

***What do we watch for?***

- ❖ Meals are a pleasure but in our care for our consumers, we need to watch for the dangers.
- ❖ Please refer for checks anyone who gags or coughs when eating.
- ❖ Please follow absolutely orders for food texture eating positioning, amount of spoonfuls, and rate of eating.
- ❖ Please monitor all consumers when eating for any problems and that they have the correct meals and way of eating for their orders.
- ❖ Please be ready to help.
 - If a person suddenly gets agitated, hold their throat, cannot speak, looks as though they have choked, use the abdominal thrusts, call 911, and follow up as you are trained to do.



911

What orders will we need to follow?

It is important that all consumers who have a risk of choking are evaluated, a plan made out, doctor's orders made, and that ***everyone*** who cares for them knows what they are. This includes the way we position the consumer, the speed of eating, the size of mouthfuls, and the texture of the food and liquids.

Each team will need to agree on the textures and what texture orders mean. Check with your team. In general we list textures in categories as below:

- ✓ Bite-sized pieces are usually 1" square.
- ✓ Chopped is 1" or less and bread is soaked and cookies are crumbled.
- ✓ Finely chopped is about the size of a rice grain for all food (including soups).
- ✓ Pureed is baby food texture.
- ✓ Liquids may be thickened to syrup or pudding texture.

Please watch our consumer!

- ✓ Follow up on those that gag or cough.
- ✓ Tell all the care team about all orders that involve feeding.
- ✓ Be ready to give first aid.
- ✓ With care, meals can be safe and enjoyable for all our consumers and staff.